

Potential

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Back in week four we were thinking about the concept of servant leadership and empowering others. In my contribution for that week ("Starfish"), I shared with you my thoughts on how our emotive relationship with volunteers is often at odds with our relationship with our co-workers. I emphasised how we demonstrate to volunteers that we value their time and contribution by focussing on creating a positive relationship and genuinely wanting them to feel they are contributing to something worthwhile, and I highlighted that this attitude should be the same for your paid co-workers.

This week we encounter another parallel, where the way we would naturally approach the recruitment of our volunteers (or select a team for a specific project) is often at odds with the way we would recruit/select a team of paid co-workers. And contrary wise, the way we then manage individual members to get the best out of paid workers is often at odds to the way we train and develop individual volunteers despite the benefits of applying the same principles.

As we begin to work through the traits that help Mary effectively lead teams of what could be interpreted as paid workers, you might be concerned that you are not at this stage of your career yet. However these principles absolutely apply to the teams of volunteers you are likely to lead from the earliest stages of your conservation career and who you will be reliant upon to deliver your projects and achieve the wider vision of your role. So keep in mind my thoughts from week four and try to think of everyone in the same light - as when you do begin to line manage paid staff the principles of effective leadership you use with volunteers will come naturally.

Throughout my time as Volunteer Coordinator at Rutland Water Nature Reserve I recruited hundreds of volunteers, most of the time to join teams managed by other members of staff. I should say now that it is very hard to recruit for other people and I made many mistakes due to poor judgement and personality clashes, or attitude simply didn't win over lack of capability. At times I unintentionally caused myself and my colleagues a fair amount of stress and some tough conversations had to be had, but I learnt many lessons in how to right those wrongs and how not to end up in those situations in the first place.

Whilst I didn't always get it right, even before I gained an insight into effective leadership I intuitively recruited/selected volunteers for teams based on attitude – and due to the informal nature in which volunteers are often recruited it was easy to do so (or at least it was back then). During initial meetings with a volunteer I would always glean as much information from them as I could about the skills and experience they could bring to the team as that is important too, but my priority was always personality. I remember excitedly telling colleagues when I had found them someone who "would be a lot of fun" or was "just lovely" and I was sure they would enjoy working with them. Of course, there were exceptions to this rule; there were times when capability/skill, particularly when it came to fieldwork or ID, would win every time. As highly skilled naturalists have become fewer and further between I would have been equally excited to recruit a talented Dipterist or specialist in Bryophytes for example, even if I had concerns about their attitude due to the value of their expertise.

Essentially, when recruiting/selecting volunteers I was always looking for what they had the potential to achieve based on their attitude to their volunteer work and the people around them. I would worry about working on areas of weaknesses once we knew them a little better and could assess the best approach.

Initial meetings were always followed by a trial session which was made clear gave both parties the opportunity to see if they were the right fit for the team or task – although rarely did we turn anyone away as we were very accepting that volunteers are new to the experience and unless too many alarm bells go off then we would naturally give them a chance to participate and to achieve their potential once they've gained the skills they need on the job. My point is, in my experience just like the way we are more emotive in creating effective relationships with volunteers, there is an emotive element to the way they are selected for our teams too. We are much more empathetic when it comes to the skills they don't have and will need to learn on the job as we instinctively recognise that our volunteers behaviour is just as important as the skills and experience they bring to help us deliver results.

In my experience, when things are not going so well with a volunteer, for example they behave inappropriately or they are simply not effective in their task as staff, again we are much more compassionate in the way we handle this for fear of upset or giving ourselves a bad reputation by dealing with the situation insensitively. Unlike the way they would handle this situation with their staff, I found co-workers less willing to apply an individual approach to volunteer training and development in order to improve their capability and/or attitude which would help them

reach their potential, preferring instead to overlook this behaviour or ask me to manage the situation. Whereas similar behaviour by paid workers was more likely to be mitigated through one to ones, coaching by their line manager, reviews or additional training (even if minimal). Understandably, we didn't have the resources for each of our 500+ volunteers to have their own action plan but in some areas of work we could and did create subtle action plans for volunteers we identified as needing them the most and carried them out discreetly- and when the time and effort was put in to do this we did see vast improvements in both attitude and capability. It is something I wish we could have done more of. I can recommend this as a first step for rectifying issues with volunteer performance to address any weaknesses on your part – often following an informal conversation about how they are getting on, some one-to-one support or tailored training any issues can be ironed out without distress as they boil down to miscommunication, misunderstandings or lack of awareness. My next step would be to try and get the volunteer involved in a different area of work if possible, to see if they are more suited and this improves their experience as well as yours. However, there are times when, just like some staff, a volunteer is simply a bad fit and it is no one's fault. In these instances, it is best to work with your colleagues to devise an exit strategy for them that is sensitive and as smooth as possible. This needs to be a well-considered conversation as it will not be easy to have but in the long term will be best for all involved.

The capability and attitude matrix Barry share this week is a great tool for assessing the potential of both volunteers and co-workers and to help you ensure you're enjoying working with the team around you and achieving great things, whether that be a group of co-workers or volunteers. I wish I'd had this way of thinking brought to my attention sooner! No one wants to be constantly stressed by people issues on a day to day basis. We work in some wonderful places, and we should be sharing them with those who have the right attitude towards their work and the potential to deliver great results for conservation. I can highly recommend being proactive rather than reactive when it comes to putting together and leading a team of people – the effort put in early on pays off later down the line when you have a happy and effective team around you and work doesn't feel so much like hard work.